



# Bill Adams' scholarship has profoundly changed the way conservationists see the world

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It is unusual for academic writing, in and of itself, to fundamentally change policy and practice. However, Bill Adams' highly original and influential writing about conservation has demonstrated how this can be done. Bill retired as the Moran Professor of Conservation and Development at the University of Cambridge in 2022 and this year he stands down as a Senior Editor of *Oryx* after more than 25 years. Now is a good time to reflect on his extraordinary body of work and, we hope, introduce a new audience to his writing.

Reading Bill's extensive back catalogue is to have a wise and often sharply humorous voice talk you through the major debates in conservation over the last quarter of a century. He is incredibly well-read, and erudite in his references, but his writing has a light touch that is a pleasure to read. From amongst Bill's varied writings we highlight some key pieces that illustrate the breadth of his thinking. All are worth reading (or re-reading) in their own right, but they also illustrate four lessons that shine through.

## Conservation needs a diversity of perspectives

Bill was ahead of his time in advocating for conservation to be interdisciplinary, to draw on relevant theories and insights from across scholarship. Unlike most conservationists of his generation, he came into conservation from geography (a discipline that combines social and natural sciences) rather than from a background in ecology or biology.

His 2007 editorial (Adams, 2007) is an insightful take on interdisciplinarity. Bill values disciplinary expertise, stating "without taxonomy, Tardigrades are just 'bugs'; without anthropology, ethnicity is just 'tribe', and any intelligent detailed discussion of biodiversity and society is stillborn". He notes that conservation needs to break free of the boundaries that traditionally constrain academic research, and that biologically trained conservationists need to engage with social sciences if they are to address the causes and consequences of biodiversity loss, which are embedded in political, economic and societal contexts. This may not be a surprising insight nowadays, but its importance was not then widely recognized.

Bill's scholarship takes the long view: exploring where conservation is coming from, and how its past shapes

current institutions, relationships and worldviews. He was one of the first to think about the influence of conservation's colonial past, with his book *Decolonizing Nature* (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). Similarly, his masterful account of the history of Fauna & Flora, a conservation NGO with which he has worked closely as a Board member and as an editor of this journal, explores the transition of penitent hunters into nature conservationists (Adams, 2004). Bill's writing challenges us as readers both to take the long view on the context within which conservationists operate, and to consider how our own backgrounds affect the way we engage with nature and the people and institutions with which we interact.

## Trade-offs must be recognized and negotiated

Bill's writing often cuts through a debate to the heart of an issue. A good example is his classic essay 'If community conservation is the answer for Africa, what is the question?' (Adams & Hulme, 2001), which feels as fresh today as when it was published 23 years ago. The piece caricatures different stances on community conservation: the preservationists whose focus is instrumental—working with communities to make biodiversity objectives more achievable—and those who focus on using conservation to generate benefits for people. Bill and his co-author reject uncritical expectations that community conservation is able to deliver wholly on either of these agendas. In a beautifully constructed piece they point out that the appropriate question is not whether community conservation works, but who gets to decide how the inevitable trade-offs between the objectives of different groups are negotiated.

The inevitability of trade-offs is a recurring theme: Bill has no patience for attractive but overly simple stories about win-wins for people and nature. In a review in *Science* (Adams et al., 2004) he and his co-authors present a helpful typology of four ways of looking at links between poverty reduction and conservation. This piece continues to be highly read and cited 2 decades later.

## Conservation is inherently political

In the 1990s Bill started to identify with the emerging discipline of political ecology, which wrestles with the way power dynamics shape nature and how that intersects with human justice. He has been influential in critical social science ever since. Bill once wrote that he is often asked why he insists on 'making conservation political' (Adams, 2015, p. 64).

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Decisions about how resources are allocated are inherently political, and Bill has powerfully exposed this fact and challenged others to recognize it. This approach is highlighted by an article that Bill co-authored (Büscher et al., 2017), which points out the implications of calls from prominent conservationists to set aside 50% of the planet for nature. This issue fractures conservation as a discipline, and Bill's writing on the topic (and other controversial issues such as biodiversity offsetting; Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2017) highlights the implications of the choices conservationists make both for equity and for nature itself.

One piece of Bill's writing that we particularly enjoy is his searing satire on the future of biodiversity conservation (Adams, 2010). Conservation plc takes the form of an imagined after dinner speech at the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2030. Ridiculous acronyms parodying international conservation NGOs, digs at the corporatization of conservation, and painfully close-to-the-bone characterizations of conservation failures are plentiful. At its heart, this piece is about the future conservationists want and are working towards. It starts with a statement from the last remaining orangutan (named Compassion) who lives in a specially constructed enclosure with 24-hour veterinary surveillance. While the audience in 2030 value this last survivor of its species, the piece makes it clear how tragic an ending is: simply avoiding extinction in the strictest sense is a pathetically unambitious target.

### The most effective criticism comes from a position of love

Bill is not simply a critical social scientist pointing out conservation's flaws from the side lines. Rather, he engages with making the practice of conservation better and therefore understands what makes up the sector: its people, institutions and history. This proximity, and affection, allows him to hold up a mirror to conservation and its practices without judgement. By being an insider, Bill can ask tough questions about our behaviour, such as the tendency of conservationists to fly around the world. In a piece that starts with an informal discussion between colleagues and pivots to discuss an upcoming major IUCN report on sustainability that Bill led, he gently but firmly shows conservationists that we cannot ignore our own contribution to environmental degradation—again before anyone else was writing in this way (Adams, 2008). Many of us are still torn as to what changes to make to our own lives in the face of the nature and climate emergency. Bill's thoughts bear repeating: 'We have to make the issue of a transition to sustainability central to our fight for nature, just as we make nature the centre of the push for

sustainability. Anything else is wilfully tunnel-visioned and ultimately self-defeating. Anything else is, surely, simply immoral' (p. 70). More than 15 years later, it is depressing that we do not yet have a clear path forward.

Bill's genius is that he builds an argument and lets the reader join the dots. This leaves the reader feeling cleverer than they felt before—as if they themselves have uncovered the insights whilst reading. We hope this editorial and the associated virtual issue of *Oryx* articles will encourage new readers to delve into the treasure trove that is Bill's work. This includes his editorial for this issue (Adams, 2024), in which he reflects on *Oryx*, how the changing world of conservation has been reflected in its pages, and urges us to be better conservationists.

Bill's most recent book (Redford & Adams, 2021) is focused on the future. As ever, Bill continues to look over the horizon, at the way conservation is changing, or needs to change. Conservation scholars, policy makers and practitioners will all benefit from Bill's continued insights as society navigates the huge environmental challenges we face.

This Editorial and the *Oryx* articles cited are available as a virtual issue at [cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/virtual-issues](https://cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/virtual-issues).

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